

Sari Nuseibeh, professor of philosophy and political analyst:

## 'We are standing at the limit of our endurance'

*Recent developments in the region indicate regress rather than progress in the peace process. Al-Fajr's Khaled Abu Aker solicited the views of Dr. Sari Nuseibeh, professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University and a prominent political analyst, on these developments.*

**Q:** There are threats to break off the U.S.-PLO dialogue. Who will be the loser from such a step?

**A:** Both the PLO and the current U.S. administration can lose from breaking off the current dialogue between them, the first because it is at least partly through the United States that peace in the region can be achieved, if it can be achieved at all, and the latter because it is only by going through the form of wishing to achieve peace in the region that its interests and relations in the area can be protected. It is of course arguable that U.S. disengagement from the peace process will only minimally affect U.S. interests, especially given the dependence of some Arab governments on U.S. aid. It is equally arguable that the PLO stands to lose nothing by cutting short a peace scheme that addresses it in the first instance only in order to bypass it in the second. If these two kinds of opposite arguments are more or less correct, then it will be more or less correct to say that just as much dif-

ference will be made to the two sides through continued dialogue as through discontinuation.

**Q:** Do you think the threats were part of a U.S. campaign to divert criticism over the veto it used to abort the sending of a Security Council mission?

**A:** The U.S. Congress, always more pliable to Jewish and Israeli interests and pressure than the administration, has never been enamored of the administration's policy to institute some kind of dialogue with the PLO. One of the main defenses of the administration has been the PLO's stated rejection of terrorism. Another defense has been the PLO's indispensability in starting an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Following Abu al-Abbas' foiled beach raid, the first of these defenses simply cracked. Regardless of motives, causes, plans or even the truth itself, the beach operation could not but have been viewed as a terrorist operation. The administration therefore has now only one defense for continued dialogue with the PLO, and its position vis-a-vis Congress and Israeli/Jewish pressure has become greatly undermined. As for the U.S. veto of the Security Council resolution, this may well have been influenced by the raid, although I believe it would

have come anyway. In conclusion, therefore, I would not say that the threat to break off dialogue was a pre-emptive U.S. measure to anticipate criticism over its veto, but that the beach raid itself caused a reassessment and may well have also precipitated or facilitated the veto.

**Q:** How do you see the decision of the Palestinian figures in the occupied territories to boycott all official contacts with the U.S. Consulate and U.S. envoys? Will this have an effect on the administration's policy in the region?

**A:** The decision of local Palestinians to cut off official political dialogue with U.S. officials came in response to what was judged to have been insufficient U.S. interest in, and respect for, Palestinian lives. Given that the U.S. administration was trying to use its dialogue with the PLO as the conduit through which to involve local Palestinians in the peace process, this decision in one sense makes the PLO contact obsolete, and in another sense it makes it of unique value: obsolete because the target -- local Palestinians -- has undergone self-erasure, and of unique value because, more than at any other time, it is only the PLO that has the power to revive or rematerialize it. In my view, the next U.S. step

in this context will therefore be primarily a function of its overall decision of whether to disengage from the peace process and the area or not.

**Q:** Isn't there a contradiction between the boycott and the PLO's decision to continue the dialogue?

**A:** There is no contradiction. The PLO is a political organ that fulfills the role of a Palestinian government. Governments make decisions on the basis of long-term sustained interests. Individuals in the occupied territories are no more than ordinary Palestinian citizens. They can reflect the current public mood, and be free in giving immediate expression of it. As a matter of fact, too much has been made of some of them, or us, in the first place. We may be public personalities, but that does not make us political leaders with governmental responsibilities. As ordinary citizens we can be angry and express our anger; we can boycott officials and boycott American goods; and as public figures we owe it to our public to express ourselves in exactly the kind of way that the public wishes us to. Otherwise we may as well be consular figures rather than public figures. As for the PLO, it has to calculate its relationship with the United States on the basis of national interest, rather than national mood. If interest and mood are at variance, as may presently be the case, then it would only be natural to expect the kind of discrepancy that exists now.



**Q: Does the recent military operation by the Palestine Liberation Front and the PLO's refusal to condemn it indicate a change in the organization's strategy and a failure of the Palestinian peace policy?**

**A:** The raid reflects a growing sense of desperation. Together with the Mahane Yehuda incident, it is a sign of things to come, of a dynamic of deterioration that is being set into motion. Moderation in the Palestinian camp is being swept aside in favor of extremism. The cause of all of this is Israel's intransigence and the growth of fascism. Decades ago, Palestinians in favor of peace used to say: offer Israel peace and you will see its true colors. Sadly, their comments are now vindicated. My forecast is that we are now standing at one of the most critical points in the evolution of our conflict with Israel. We are standing at the limit of our endurance. Already, many of us have crossed over the brink. What will unfold before us therefore is a bloody racial-religious war zone. It may unfold slowly, or rapidly, but it will surely unfold, unless there were to be a powerful international involvement that would have the strength to pull the region out of the political black hole it is gravitating toward.